

Letters to the editor (A reply to Kauffman)

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To the editor:

We read with interest your editorial statements in two recent issues of EEQ (2:2 and 2:3). Your comments contain some most interesting elements and are alluring as intellectual exercises. We feel obligated, however, to respond to some of your perceptions of the current state of affairs in special education. In particular we are concerned with what you apparently believe to be a void of philosophical leadership in the field.

As students of the evolution of special education, we find it difficult to accept the view that philosophy in our discipline has consisted of "little more than advocacy based on humanistic sentiment" (Kauffman, 1981a, p. vii). Rather, we believe that this is a field which emerged from a philosophical base of concern for the malleability of human faculties, a rejection of social utilitarianism, and the extending of the principles of social justice to all people. Special education has been guided throughout its development by these general philosophical themes and the more specific tenets inherent in each. We need to search no further than the thoughts of Itard, Seguin, and Montessori and, more recently, the works of Blatt, Rhodes, Hobbs, and others to dispel the notion that special education is philosophically barren.

The "sentimental" proposition that all people are deserving of the opportunity for an appropriate education along with optimal integration into society has been advanced by leaders in the field for many decades. Only recently has it become embodied in law. This philosophical proposition has in general served handicapped persons well and will, we hope, survive the current social and political forces which militate against it. It seems to us that the concept of the "limits of educability" (Kauffman, 1981b) bears the flavor of placation to these forces. Although a different conceptualization of "education" for the very severely handicapped is, we feel, needed, a philosophical abandonment of this population is not.

Finally, it should be noted that there is an apparent paradox in the arguments presented in the editorials to which we refer. On one hand the field of special education is chastised for allowing itself to be influenced philosophically by other social movements (e.g., civil rights). This seems to suggest that special education should exist as some form of isolated discipline developing and maintaining "'pure" philosophy of its own. On the other hand we are reminded that we must be aware of the ecology of the various social factors of which special education is a part.

Perhaps the discomfort felt by some professionals in special education is due not to a lack of a sound philosophical base within the discipline but due to an attempt to respond and change according to political whims which are in constant flux. Is this necessary or productive? We think not.

References

Kauffman, J. M. From the editor. *Exceptional Education Quarterly*, 1981, 2(2), vii. (a)

Kauffman, J.M. Introduction: Historical trends and contemporary issues in special education in the United States. In J.M. Kauffman & D.P. Hallahan (Eds.), *Handbook of special education*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981. (b)